

The power of labeling discourse in the construction of disability in Ghana

Joseph S Agbenyega
Monash University

Abstract

In recent times, disability issues have become the major concern for advocacy groups, teachers, school administrators, and policy makers in many countries. There is much work currently being done in many countries in order to find the most appropriate placement for persons with disabilities, particularly in the areas of education, training, and employment. However, there is evidence to suggest that these efforts have been continuously thwarted by the nature and type of labels societies place on individuals with disabilities. These labels vary in nature according to the perceptions, traditions, cultures and beliefs of different societies. This article explores the power of labeling in the Ghanaian society and its effects on the education, treatment and management of persons with disabilities in that country. The paper concludes that unless labeling is removed from the individual and, rather, placed on the problem, our minds will continue to be arrested to see only the negative side of disabled persons, and any consideration for appropriate placement of persons with disabilities is unlikely to work.

Introduction

With the proclamation and reaffirmation of the right of the disabled child in Salamanca, Spain in 1994, many countries have intensified efforts to find the best educational option and social placement for persons who are labeled as disabled. Despite this dramatic development, and positive achievements by some countries such as United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, in other countries, particularly Ghana in sub-Saharan West Africa, not much has been done in this regard.

Research conducted in Ghana points to the fact that this situation is partly due to the labeling discourse that is firmly rooted in the dominant culture of the people (Avoke, 1997, 2001; Oliver-Commey, 2001; Agbenyega, 2002; Ocloo et al., 2002). In this paper, I describe my observations of the general situation of how persons with disabilities are labeled within the Ghanaian tradition and how these labels become powerful tools, or weapons that society and classroom teachers use to suppress and to exclude students with and without disabilities. My observation is supported with evidence in the literature. I argue that if educators focus on the

problem that arises daily in the classroom rather than on the individual, this would lead to the creation and use of innovative pedagogies that speak for inclusion.

Labels: how powerful are they?

I begin with an analogy. In a walk through supermarkets or shops one would identify various products on display by their colourful labels. Manufacturers and sales personnel, from musicians to book writers, just to mention a few, all over the world, use various labels to identify their products. Labels serve as identifiers; they prescribe and attribute particular characteristics to things. Labels speak to us and appeal to senses. Sometimes they encourage us to act irrationally thus diminishing our sense of judgment when we yield to them. They influence our decision-making and limit our whole thinking to the context of the label. Who will choose to buy a tin of milk which is wrongly labeled 'expired and dangerous to your health?' Though the contents are just right but the label misrepresents its true value? I think no one.

I argue that because the labels are so powerful, they become the determinant forces that guide our choices as to what to accept and what to reject. We become convinced by labels and settle for them without digging further to unpack the hidden components. In the same way, labels can blindfold us as members of society and educators such that we are unable to see the hidden talents of persons with disabilities. Educators and policy makers sometimes focus only on the negative side of students and justify their actions by the labels they place on them.

This suggests something about how strong and influential labels can be. When we are caught within the syndrome of labeling, we are dissuaded from reality and become embedded within the label that begins a process of attaching deviance to an action name or attributes of an individual (Perusin, 1994). Gove (1980) writes, "As with other deviants, it is not so much their actual disability that is the key, but rather society's reaction to it, the label so attached renders the individual deviant" (p. 234).

An individual who is labeled and constructed as disabled suffers the often debilitating consequences of the label (Persaud, 2000). It is clear that though labels on products are tangible things, and those placed on individuals with disabilities are words, they are both forms of language. Language affects the way we think and act (Foreman, 1996). Thus inherent in the language used to label and inscribe, and to construct the disabled in Ghana is premised on the dominant cultural ideology that marginalizes, silences and constructs subjectivities through the society and the school system.

With language we often exaggerate the nature of people who differ from us. Foreman (1996) argues that we are so possessed with the labeling syndrome that sometimes we unintentionally use such language to stereotype, construct and classify people as disabled without looking beyond the individual. For instance, the use of labels such as the disabled, the handicapped, epileptics, spastics and the blind are all social constructions which imply that people so classified form an homogenous group. But further examination will reveal that these individuals are different from each other (Foreman, 1996). Gee (1999) stated that it is in the details of the language that social goods are created, sustained, distributed and redistributed. It is in the details of language that people are harmed and helped. Placing disability before the individual is very dehumanizing because the individual is lost. In severe cases we forget to call persons with disabilities by their names; replacing their names with labels.

Perusin (1994), drawing on the work of Sacco (1992), specified three powerful dimensions of labeling:

- ?? Patterns of social interaction change when labels are assigned to the individual.
- ?? Labeling pushes people into the periphery or margins and into the company of others in a similar subculture.
- ?? The individual who is labeled 'disabled' and so classified, gradually conforms to the characteristics of the label, which results in self-fulfilling prophecy (p. 84).

These statements indicate that disability discourse has implications for social justice and human rights.

In Ghana, these statements depict the real situation in many schools where teaching and learning is associated with labeling (Ocloo et al., 2002). The labeling process starts from the family and penetrates through the school system, and because it is rooted in the traditional beliefs of the people, it is difficult to counter the menace (Oliver-Commey, 2001).

Labeling: its processes and the cultural discourse in Ghana

Labeling as a method of constructing disability in Ghana emanates from the socio-cultural underpinnings of disability. The Ghanaian society is highly traditional with more than two hundred ethnic and tribal groups. The labeling process starts at birth. Pregnancy and birth is highly regarded as a blessing and is characterized with high expectations. There is no reason a family can give to explain why a child is born with a disability except that the anger of the gods has been visited on them

(Ocloo et al., 2002). To safeguard against a child being born disabled, pregnant women, particularly in many rural settings in Ghana are subjected to various kinds of taboos. For instance, a pregnant woman is not allowed to eat eggs for the reason that the child might develop into hydrocephalus (big head).

Any child born with any defect is seen as a violation of such traditional belief systems and the family will forever suffer from ambivalent reactions (Avoke, 2001). The birth of a disabled child within a family could lead to divorce and family disintegration. In one of the regions (Brong Ahafo), pregnant women are barred from eating fish caught from a river called 'Nsuakoraa'. The people in this area believe that the river is a god and the fish are its children, and eating fish from this river will result in miscarriages and 'retarded' children. People born with disabilities receive labels with various dehumanizing names and their parents become victims of isolation and mockery. With the above notion of cultural ideology, persons with Down's syndrome in Ghana are believed to be children given by the river gods, and hence they call them 'Nsuoba', meaning water children" (Avoke, 1997).

In most Ghanaian communities, people believe in reincarnation of human beings and as a result there is a high tendency among people to believe that some families disregard the general principles of nature for which they should be punished by the gods of the land" (Ocloo et al., 2002 p. 17).

Disability is also seen in Ghana as a result of witchcraft, sorcery, 'juju' and magic (Avoke, 1997, Agbenyega, 2002). Before the era of Christianity and missionary activities, Ghanaians were purely traditionalists, believing in all sorts of inanimate objects. Some Ghanaians believe that people with epilepsy are filled with demons that sometimes torment and throw them on the ground, when they so wish (Agbenyega, 2002). In the Ewe tribe, where I come from, persons with epilepsy are labeled 'dzeanyikplatowo,' derogatory tribal language that literally means 'falling down sicknesses'. No one is allowed to touch or be near them when the convulsion occurs, in the belief that anyone who does so will also be possessed with the demons.

Dogbe (1995) indicated that among the Akpafus in the Volta Region of Ghana, the eye disease of cataracts, or 'kobi' as it is known in the local language, is believed to be a punishment from the gods for offences the victims or their family members have committed. People in the Northern Region of Ghana, hold a similar view. As a result of these derogatory labels, persons with disabilities tend to be ostracized and excluded from mainstream of society and community life, including social gatherings (Avoke, 2001).

Persons with 'mental retardation', as it is still called among Ghanaians, are the hardest hit victims of labeling. Two tribal groups, the Ewes and the Gas, refer to them as 'Asotowo', and 'Buluus' meaning idiots or fools, and reduced intellectual abilities respectively (Avoke, 1997). The most dominant tribe in Ghana, the Akans, label persons with intellectual disabilities as 'Nea wanyin agya n'adwene ho' which means 'feeble minded'. In the tradition of the tribe, these are very offensive and dehumanizing labels, which are equated with insults.

In typical traditional communities, crocodiles, and snakes are considered to have some special powers and any cruelty against them can lead to the individual giving birth to a child with disability. Riches in some traditional societies in Ghana are viewed with mixed feelings. Many people believe that parents can exchange any part of the child's body spiritually, with money such that the part so exchanged will become defective. Consequently, a rich family with a person with a disability is labeled "sikaduro" (juju money). Oliver-Commey (2001) noted that a majority of Ghanaians, through these belief systems, labeled persons with disabilities as social misfits, social outcasts and in most cases treat them like animals. Superstition and the cultural belief system thus pose a consequential and ominous threat to inclusive education, because under such circumstances it is difficult for any interaction to occur between the 'normal' and the disabled. Thus, ascribing the causes of disability to punishment from the gods and evil forces is an act of submitting to a nebulous and possibly sinister influence which some consider as a cultural heritage.

This kind of attribution leaves a scar on the family and penetrates through the child's schooling. Though these beliefs do not conform to positivistic tradition, they are powerful, and they affect all aspects of human endeavor. It is argued that people constructed with these terms are constantly reminded of their shortcomings, and potential doors are permanently shut to them. The consequence is rejection, exclusion and failure (Tilstone & Visser, 1996). It is evident that strict adherence and allegiance to dominant traditions and cultural values that have no empirical basis have become destructive weapons and tools with which people in Ghana perpetually construct disability. It is apparent that labels possess the power to negate and to depict deficits, and to overshadow inherent potentials of the labeled. More so, labels become instruments for defining characteristics of persons, denying their complex whole. In addition, labels for identifying placement options fail to properly locate failure in the education system (Christiansen, 1992; Slee, 1993). The following interviews support the above observations.

Recently, I interviewed three final year students with visual impairment, at the University College of Education in Ghana. In addition, I interviewed my elder brother whose son with intellectual disability, was ejected from school, and was unable to gain another educational placement. I asked the students how they managed to enter their tertiary institution, and how the teachers and other students perceived them: Following is the story of one of these students.

It is not all that easy. I had a nightmare with the teachers at the initial stage. When I write, it was full of mistakes. I cannot see what the teacher writes on the board. I was caned several times. I failed my exams several times because we all do the same thing. My mother once told me witches have removed my brain. Teachers called me lazy girl and all sorts of names. I drop out of school at stage six but Sight Savers International came to my rescue. They assessed me and sent me to Akropong School for the blind. That is how I managed it. Even here some people don't see us as complete people.

The other two students had similar stories of mistreatment. Their circumstances differed from the first student, in that they started in a special school because they had no residual vision, and they did not drop out of school, due to the help of the same international organization.

I asked my brother "why did you not educate your child"? He replied:

You know, he started in a mainstream school. Later in stage 3 he was sent home for misbehaving. I found him another school and he was thrown out again because the teachers said they could not cope. He was diagnosed as having an intellectual disability. I sent him to a special school in the capital. After 5 months they too send him away as they could not educate him. The teachers told me that my son's idiocy is beyond education. Meanwhile, he can eat and do little things himself including dressing. Now he is twenty one years old but has no education, and is home bound. There is nothing I can do; he needs to stay like that for the rest of his life.

These statements are powerful examples of how society's traditional conception of disability and labels can damage members of the same community and deny them of their basic human rights.

Labeling: its effects on education and service provision

In Ghana, dualism of education is still firmly rooted. Individuals with disabilities attend segregated residential schools, while other children attend mainstream schools. In many schools, classrooms are used for labeling students, rather than teaching and learning. There are twenty two special schools for persons with

disabilities, located in isolated places in the ten regions of a country of a population of about twenty million people. There are no statistics available on the number of individuals in Ghana who have disabilities (Avoke, 2001; Agbenyega, 2002). There is no definite policy to determine who qualifies for special needs services, and how the services should be provided (Asamani, 2000; Avoke, 1997, 2001; Agbenyega, 2002). Lack of expertise in assessment procedures, and inadequate assessment centres, exacerbate the problem of labeling. The use of pejorative terms in classrooms to describe persons with disabilities is widespread in Ghana.

My classroom observation in some four schools in Accra metropolis, the capital of Ghana, exposed very serious problems. The rigidity of Ghanaian classrooms takes many forms. It is apparent that the method employed by almost all the teachers is 'talk and chalk'. Teacher dominated instruction, use of insults as labels, excessive corporal punishment such as canning; knocking; pulling ears; pinching; and use of defamatory language, are rampant. For example, in the course of the teaching, the teacher will pause and ask the question; 'do you understand?' And the chorus will follow, 'yes!' The teacher then writes exercises on the board for students to work at. What follows next is those who scored below the pass mark set by the teacher are caned severely. Insults from the teacher then follow, 'stupid', 'idiot', 'block headed' and 'are you out of your senses?' In a system that does not recognize diversity, all children are treated on the same intellectual basis. This is one of the reasons why caning is used as an instrument for correction, and as a means of achieving the teacher's notion that students can be forced to achieve academic success.

Teachers' monotonic treatment of the curriculum is a practice that results in some students being labeled as 'feeble minded'. It is to be noted that such practices create the platform for excessive labeling and construction of disabilities, because of the rigid and teacher dominated classroom pedagogy. It is not surprising to see teachers openly rejecting student's answers, with attendant labels, such as 'are you sensible!' These students are labeled just because their answers differ from what the teacher expects.

The labels start right from the mainstream classrooms and leave a 'scar' on the children. Some teachers, who are unable to cope with challenging classroom situations, resort to crude measures, unleashing various punishments and labels on students, constructing them as disabled. I argue that labeling students in these ways rather than identifying and dealing with their problems is part of the culture to cover up incompetent teachers' lack of ingenuity, insight and creativity.

This kind of labeling is very detrimental to students' self esteem and self concept (McDermott, 1993). It looks as if teachers and people in society have now cultivated various kinds of labels and curiously, are in search of students to place them on. I will argue that persons so constructed as disabled in the classroom situation cease to be perceived as real people, a stigma that remains on them throughout their life in society. This is a vicious cycle, a never-ending creation of labels and labeling of students. Marks (1994) puts it that, "new labels and new disabilities... are constantly being created... and students continue to be blamed for their disabilities" (p.76). This is exactly the situation in Ghanaian schools, and consequently, many students drop out of school (Oliver-Commey, 2001). Those who do not drop out become truants. Others who experience excessive failures in the mainstream schools have no other choice than to be recommended to special schools or to abandon school altogether.

Another issue of concern is the way special schools are labeled with special names. There are currently twenty two special segregated schools in Ghana (Ocloo, et al. 2002). With the exception of one school, the only private one, which is known as New Horizon, the rest all have labels that I consider derogatory. Consider the following: 'X School for the Mentally Handicapped', 'Z' school for the Deaf', and 'W' Special School for the Mentally Handicapped. These names are boldly inscribed on bill boards that direct people to these schools. There is no similar categorization for students attending mainstream schools, which, in Ghana have good and appealing names such as 'Morning star School', 'Kotobaabi Junior Secondary School', 'Golden Child School,' and the Three Star School. I argue that from the gates of these special schools, society has already conceptualized who is to be valued and who will not be valued.

The labeling of these schools places an indelible and obvious stigmatizing mark on students who attend them. Their preparation for life and acceptance in community life and work among colleagues is severed as a result of these humanly constructed labels and the types of school they attended. It is very difficult to look beyond the negative aspects of students within those settings because the mind has already been set at the gates of the schools. These school labeling is another example of the creation and perpetuation social inequality. Gibson (1986) argued that this kind of labeling becomes part of the students' life so much so that the opportunities open to them in the adult world are restricted. He further states:

Segregated form of special education is an act of labeling and stigmatization that legitimize existing social inequalities, and those that so labeled, feel legitimately inferior and possess reduced control over the determination of their lives (p.144).

In Ghana, special needs students, particularly those with intellectual disabilities are further disempowered because there is no graduation to mark completion of their schooling. In fact there is no completion, they simply continue to exist there (Agbenyega, 2002).

Recurrent convulsion is a serious disabling condition in Ghana. "A child's school attendance can be terminated by a headmaster who fails to recognize that convulsions are neither contagious nor are the visitations from the gods or one's long departed evil ancestors" (Oliver-Commey, 2001, p. 9). This results in spectacle of students, children and adults with disabilities engaged in active begging at traffic intersections of our cities and towns, and is further example of the inadequate and unfulfilling response of the Ghanaian society to issues involving disabled persons (Oliver-Commey, 2001).

In most cases, families have thrown out these people into the streets to beg for alms because their continuous existence in the family would lead to isolation and social rejection of that family. On the other hand some others have been refused entry into mainstream schools by school authorities. This is so because legislation on special needs education and management is non existent (Asamani, 1996; Avoke, 1997; Agbenyega, 2002). Through the use of labels the possibility exists for some individuals to become inscribed texts of disability, leading to valuing and acceptance of some students, and the mockery and rejection of others (Persaud, 2000).

A student whose performance falls short of expectation is sometimes considered to be bewitched. Parents attempting to rectify these situations, sometimes seek divine intervention from charismatic churches, some of which proclaim themselves as having miraculous solutions to these problems. Those who are non-Christians may consult fetishes and traditional divinities to find the cause of their children's poor performance in schools. Again, labeling has caused a complex problem for students and parents alike. Such shift in focus to divine intervention diverts attention from the inadequacies and failure of the school system and its organization to provide equal opportunities for students with and without disabilities.

Persaud (2000) argues that the practice of labeling students as 'other' imposing normative assumptions, and providing specialized learning environments undermines the formation of a community because the 'others' so constructed are eliminated from benefiting equally from the social resource distribution. According

to Oliver-Commey (2001) these beliefs in Ghana, the creation and labeling of some individuals as other, unfortunately discourage close relationships in family units with disabled children. This leads to persons with disability having little or no association with other members of society, a situation which results in increased stress levels.

Researchers have documented various cases where stress levels in families are associated with the way society constructs and labels their children, a situation which leads to difficulty in psychological adjustments, social exclusion, marital and economic dysfunction (Fowle, 1968; Adams, 1984; Brinchmann, 1999). The list of the labeling effects on persons with disabilities and their families is never ending. It calls for the serious attention of all social actors to address this issue.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued a number of matters concerning labeling as a powerful tool for constructing disability in Ghana. What is worth reiterating is the dominance of the prevailing labeling discourse in mainstream classrooms, which predisposes students to failure and dropout. Chinze (2000) points out that society's attitudes and perspectives towards persons with disabilities have always been complex and often catalyzed by the prevailing culture, religion, government, and economic conditions. However, changes in world order, and the issue of globalization now dictates a new direction, recognition, and respect for individuals with disabilities, which Ghana must emulate.

Ghana cannot afford to be left out in the new world order. It is important for Ghana to immediately realize the importance of inclusive education as a means of reducing the labeling process, which, at the moment is perpetuated through the practice of segregation. Research points out that inclusion has the capacity to provide for appropriate ways and means to facilitate learning, and meet the needs of all learners (Enelbrecht, Swart, Eloff, & Forlin, 2000).

I argue that special schools in Ghana, such as Schools for the 'Mentally Retarded', 'Schools for the Deaf' should be renamed with appropriate labels like mainstream local community schools. For example, 'X' School for the Mentally Handicapped could be renamed as 'Y' Community School. This re-naming will be a further step in weakening the foundations of pejorative labels, by detaching them from students who attend those schools.

I argue finally that as teachers and educators in Ghana, we have a responsibility to prevent the continuation of harm to students with disabilities, caused by the socio-cultural and traditional values of our community. We can only do this when we become informed ourselves about the evils of labeling, and become actively engaged in our profession as reflective practitioners. Such engagement will help us to label our own teaching and students' problems, rather than the students themselves.

Peters, Klein, & Shawick, (in Franklin, 1998) argue for a new discourse that will value individuals with disability. In Ghana, this new discourse needs to be started amongst teachers. With this process, teachers in Ghana will become leaders in advocating an inclusive school system, and ultimately, a society where everyone is a valued participant.

References

- Adams, M. (1984). Social-ethical issues in the management of developmental disability. In J. M. Berg (ed) *Perspectives and Progress in Mental Retardation*, 1, 4-6
- Agbenyega, J. S. (2002). *The need for transitional services for students with intellectual disabilities in Ghana*. Unpublished honours thesis, Faculty of Education, Clayton, Monash University
- Asamani, C. A. (2000, July). *Developing special education needs policy in Ghana: a silver lining in the dark clouds for children with special education need*. A paper presented at International Special Education Congress, Manchester, UK..
- Avoke, M. (1997). *Introduction to Special Education for Universities and Colleges*. Accra: City Publishers
- Avoke, M. (2001). Some historical perspectives in the development of Special Education in Ghana. *European Journal of Special Needs*, 16, 29-40.
- Barton, L. (1995). *Making Difficulties: research and construction of special education needs*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Brinchmann, B. S. (1999). When the home becomes a prison living with a severely disabled child? *Nursing Ethics* 6: 137-143.
- Chinze, M.M. (2000) *Schools Psychological Services*, Zimbabwe: A paper presented at International Special Education Congress, Manchester, UK.
- Christiansen, C. (1992). Deviant, disabled or different: The politics of labeling. *Australian Disability Review*, 3, 5-12.
- Dogbe, G. (1995). *Attitudes towards the visually impaired in Akpafu traditional area*, unpublished dissertation, University College of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

- Engelbrecht, P., Swart, E., Eloff, I., & Forlin, C. (2000, July). *Identifying stressors for South African teachers in the implementation of inclusive education*. Paper presented at the International Special Education Congress, Manchester, UK.
- Foreman, P. (1996). *Integration and inclusion in action* (Eds.). Marrickville, NSW, Australia: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Fowle, C. M. (1968). The effect of the severely mentally retarded child on his family. *American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, 73, 468-473.
- Gee, J. (1999). *Introduction to discourse analysis: theory and method* [electronic resource] 10/6/03, Routledge.
- Gibson, R. (1986). *Critical Theory and Education*. London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.
- Gove, W. R. (1980). *Labeling of deviance: evaluating a perspective*. (2d ed). Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Marks, G. (1994). 'Armed with new hope...': The construction of the subjectivity of students within integration. *Disability and Society*, 9(1), 71-84.
- McDermitt, R. (1993). The acquisition of a child by a learning disability. In S. Chaikin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding Practice* (269-305). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ocloo, M., Hayford, S., Agbeke, W., Gadagbui, G., Avoke, M., Boison, C., Oppong, A., Essel, J. (2002). *Foundations in special education: The Ghanaian perspective*. Cape Coast: Nyakod Printing Works.
- Oliver-Commey, J. O. (2001). *The disabled child in Ghana: Whose fault and who cares?* Accra: Ghana University Press.
- Peters, S. J., Klein, A., & Shadwick, C. (1998). From Our Voices: Special Education and the „Alter-Eagle“ Problem: In B.M. Franklin (1998). *When Children Don't Learn: Student Failure and the Culture of Teaching*. Teachers College: Columbia University.
- Persaud, P. (2000). *Labeling: Its effects on labeled students*. Paper presented at International Special Education Congress, Manchester, UK (24th-28th July).
- Perusin, A. (1994). Labelling: A dilemma or solution? *B.C Journal of Special Education*, 21 (3), 81-93.
- Sacco, V.F (1992). *Deviance: Conformity and control in Canadian society*. Toronto: Prentice -Hall Canada.
- Slee, R. (1993). The politics of integration- - new sites for old practices. *Disability, Handicap & Society*, 8(4), 351-360.
- Tilstone, C. & Visser, J. (1996). Learning difficulties, in V. Varma (Ed.) *Coping with Children in Stress*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing.